

HONORABLE HENRY A. WAXMAN

REMARKS AT YOUNG ISRAEL BANQUET 3/16/75

Before making formal acceptance of the Shofar Award, I should like to personally greet some of those in attendance. I want to express my thanks to Rabbi Stern for the tremendous hospitality and courtesy he has shown me and my family. This occasion is an especially joyous one because my mother and father are here from Los Angeles, and my wife and daughter are here from Washington, D.C. along with some of our New York family. I also want to greet the leaders of Young Israel of Los Angeles with us tonight--especially my good friends Rabbi Pinchus Gruman and Mr. Joe Klein.

Finally, I am delighted that a distinguished figure in Torah education, Rabbi Moshe Bohomilsky of the United Lubavitcher Yeshiva, was able, with his wife, to join us.

With gratitude and humility, I accept the Shofar Award of the National Council of Young Israel. I do not regard this as an "achievement award." I am proud of my work during the six years I served in the California State Legislature. However, I do not feel it makes me deserving of so great a tribute from such an important national organization as Young Israel. I accept this award rather as one given "on credit". I see it as an expression by West Coast Young Israel leaders and national leaders of confidence in my future work in Congress. I pray I will be worthy of their confidence.

I am committed to being a Jewish Congressman and not just another Congressman of "Jewish background." I believe that our religious heritage requires of me not just a special concern for the State of Israel and for the well-being of Jews in the United States and around the world, but a humanitarian concerned to see that all people are treated fairly, equally, with dignity and social justice.

I intend my remarks to be very brief. I do, however, wish to share with you some recollections from my recent journey to the Middle East. It was on my trip to Arab lands--especially Saudi Arabia -- that I felt most strongly the special nature of my role as a Jewish Congressman. My trip was made with a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee. Though we were a party of 19, I was the only Jew. That I was "different" was clear even before we left Washington. While everyone else's papers were in perfect order, my application for an entrance visa to Saudi Arabia was denied because of my religion. Only direct intervention by the State Department made it possible for me to accompany my colleagues to Saudi Arabia.

The experience of sitting in the Palace of King Faisal is one I cannot adequately describe. The King's tone and manner was so harsh that I could almost guess the content of his answers before they were translated from Arabic to English. Perhaps nowhere in the world is there a monarchy

so archaic and absolute. Through most of the interview with the King, I remained silent, pondering what my role should be. I was astounded at the King's frankness on matters regarding Israel. Clearly we were speaking with a man who had never been required to temper his remarks for purposes of politics or diplomacy.

One of my colleagues asked the King how the problem of the various religions sharing Jerusalem might be solved. The King's answer was swift. The King said, "In government and culture, Jerusalem must be Arab. Religion is a different matter. Both Muslims and Christians have holy places in the city. The Jews have no holy places in Jerusalem."

Most of the other questions were innocuous. The Congressmen were polite and a little bored. As the Chairman of our delegation rose to thank the King and conclude our interview, I felt compelled to raise some serious points however undiplomatic it might be. I interrupted our Chairman and requested his permission to ask the King two questions before our interview concluded.

I said, "Your Highness, we are glad to be guests in your country. Saudi Arabia is not only an Arab country but the very heart of the Muslim world. In this region there are many Arab countries besides your own. Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and so forth. Do you think it will ever be possible for you to accept a homeland for the Jewish people in the

Middle East?

"My second question is why do you deny entrance to Saudi Arabia to any Jews from any country in the world? You claim to be opposed only to Zionism and the State of Israel. Yet, you discriminate against all Jews. Why?"

Throughout our interview the interpreter stood facing the King but as he began to translate the King's answer to my question, he spun around and faced us. His face and tone of voice even more than his words reflected the King's answer. This King's answer was, "It is out of the question for a Jewish homeland. Palestine is an Arab country where Jews, Christians and Moslems can live - but only in an Arab country."

As to the other part of my question, the King responded: "Jews have no business in Saudi Arabia. They are our enemies. Friends of our enemies are our enemies."

The mood of our entire delegation was dramatically altered by my exchange with the King. Suddenly, it was clear to everyone that the Arabs distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism was purely academic. Despite the talk of territory and a return to the 1967 boundaries, what was at stake was not territory at all, but the very survival of the State of Israel itself.

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I returned home shortly before Purim. I began to connect my role in King Faisal's palace, indeed, my role in the Congress of the United States and the responsibility of all

of us as Jews in this time of our history with a verse in the Book of Esther. The righteous Mordechai, though he as a Tzaddik, and deeply loved Esther, found the need to speak harshly to Esther as the danger to the Jews grew. He said, "Think not to yourself that thou shalt escape in the King's house as an exception to all the Jews. For if thou holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place but thou and thy father's house shall perish." Mordechai concludes with a pointed rhetorical question, "Who knoweth whether thou art not come to royal estate for such a time as this."

I feel that all of us at this time have come to royal estate - in the counsels of government and in this country -- to speak out and not hold our peace on matters affecting Jewish destiny. We must not hold our peace in this face of evil.

This is a time when almost all the world's Jews are counting on us. I talked with the oppressed and broken remnants of the once great Egyptian Jewish community. They count on help coming from us. So do the victims of brutal oppression in Syria. And, of course, behind the Iron Curtain uncounted hundreds of thousands look to American Jewry for hope. Finally, thoughtful Israelis realize that one of the reasons we cannot all make Aliyah is that it is our destiny to help them from our positions in American society.

I thank you for having let me share some of my feelings and thoughts with you. I trust you will give me time to express in public deeds the gratitude mere words cannot convey.

It has been a thrill to receive your tribute and to address you not as an outsider, for I consider myself in spirit and association a Young Israelite.

My sincere wishes to all of you of a Pesach which unites us all in Torah and Mitzvos.

Thank you.